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ABSTRACT

This paper reports two studies designed to investigate the relationship between conceptions of distributive justice and perspective taking in preschool children. Subjects in the first study were 39 white, middle-class 4- and 5-year-old children. They were administered a concrete object form and an abstract picture form of a perceptual role-taking measure. Their moral reasoning about distributive justice was assessed verbally in a hypothetical situation and behaviorally in a real situation. Results indicated that children were better able to role-take with real objects than with pictures and that their moral reasoning was at a lower, more egocentric level in the real situation, where the rewards were edible, than in the hypothetical situation. Results also showed a moderate relationship between perceptual role taking and moral reasoning. In the second study, twenty other 4- and 5-year-olds were presented with two sharing dilemmas. Each dilemma was presented both in a picture story and in a real situation in the classroom. Subjects' social perspective taking was assessed in an interview and their cognitive role-taking ability was assessed behaviorally. Results showed that the children's moral reasoning was fairly consistent across a variety of distributive justice dilemmas and that the behavioral assessment of their reasoning appeared to be valid. Findings also showed an intercorrelation of perceptual, social, and cognitive role-taking measures, all of which were shown to be related to moral reasoning in preschoolers. (JMB)

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Moral Reasoning and Role-taking in Young Children
Verbally and Behaviorally Assessed

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William Damon has extended Kohlberg's study of moral reasoning downwards to examine early conceptions of distributive justice in children of preschool age (1975), finding that children go through certain stages in their reasoning about why, how, and when to share.

My co-author, Judy Peterson, and I wished to explore further the early changes in this important aspect of the young child's social world, distributive justice. The purpose of our study was to empirically substantiate Selman and Damon's description of how moral reasoning is related to taking another's point of view in young children (1975). This required two tools. First, a moral dilemma was needed to find out how children reason about what they should do. Our solution was to use the sharing dilemma Damon developed to discriminate early stages of conceptions of justice (1975). Second, a way to assess role-taking ability was needed. Our solution was to use perceptual role-taking tasks of the sort Piaget used (1956).

Specifically, we wished to assess this relation controlling five factors that have influenced differences in earlier studies on role-taking and reasoning:

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1. difficulty of the experimental task
2. differences between moral reasoning about a hypothetical story and reasoning in a real situation.
3. differences in moral reasoning from one situation to another.
4. differences between moral reasoning and actual moral behavior, which was of most interest to us.
5. differences between types of role-taking measured.

In our first study, 39 4- and 5-year old white, middle-class children, half boys and half girls, from a suburban nursery school in Cleveland were tested with the assistance of Jeff Rosenbaum. For our first question, the effect of difficulty of the task, we used a real-object form and a picture form, considered more abstract and therefore more difficult, of the perceptual role-taking measured. This test was administered first in picture form; for each of the ten items the child was asked to point to the view of the object that the person in the picture would see. Then in the real-object version, the child was asked to point to the view of the object that the experimenter sitting across from him saw.

Moral reasoning about distributive justice was also assessed in two ways to answer the second question, the difference in reasoning about a hypothetical situation and in a real situation. First, children made moral judgements about the proper distribution of rewards in response to Damon's story about children being rewarded for making necklaces. We used a picture story to make it easier for young children. Then they were observed as they participated in the real distribution of rewards among a group of their peers in a classroom situation similar in principle

to that of the story. Stages of reasoning were scored according to Gerson and Damon's manual (Ref. Note 1). Briefly, the first stage, 0A, says that what I want is what should be. At the second stage, 0B, one begins to be aware that others also want the same and there is a need to justify one's decision. At the third stage, 1A, one's awareness that everyone else may want the same leads to equal treatment for everyone. The fourth stage, 1B, shows concern for rewarding individuals according to merit.

Three results emerged from this study. First, the children's perceptual role-taking scores on the picture test and with real objects indicated that the two tests were consistent $E = .61$, $p < .001$, but the influence of the difficulty of the task was shown by the finding that children were better able to role-take with real objects than with pictures, $t = 2.15$, $p < .02$. This suggests that young children are better able to take another's perspective when the role-taking situation is concretely represented. Second, moral reasoning was consistent in hypothetical and real situations, $E = .94$, $p < .001$. However, the children's reasoning was at a lower, more egocentric level in the real situation where the rewards were edible, than in the hypothetical situation, $t = 6.36$, $p < .001$, replicating Gerson and Damon's observation (Note 2). Last, a moderate relationship was found between perceptual role-taking and moral reasoning in young children, $r = .42$, $p < .01$, $df = 37$.

We then went on to ask our third question, "How general is a child's moral reasoning and how general is the relationship we found?" In a second study, we expanded our sharing situation by adding two more dilemmas about distributive justice and administered the three tests to

twenty more four and five year olds. Each dilemma was presented as a picture story and as a real situation in the classroom. In the first additional picture story and real-life dilemma, the norm of standing in line for a reward conflicted with the concept of deserving a reward for helping. In the second picture story and real situation, honestly conflicted with distributing a treat to oneself and others. The child was given rewards to distribute only to those who had obeyed the teacher in a picture story and a real situation different enough to avoid recognition.

We dealt with our fourth question, the difference between a measure of verbal reasoning and moral behavior by attempting to devise a test that relied on behavior instead of words. As two and three year olds are not yet fluent, this might also be helpful for later use in testing younger children. We measured moral reasoning by the child's behavior in a forced-choice situation, as well as verbally in an interview afterwards which assessed his reasoning behind his action. To illustrate, in the birthday party story about the conflict between standing in line and being rewarded for helping, the subject is given a cupcake to award as he sees fit. The first stage, OA, where wants dictate morality, was indicated by giving the whole cupcake to the child character, Brownie. Stage OB's awareness that the other also wants what oneself wants and concern to justify one's decision was indicated by splitting the cupcake and giving the larger section to Brownie (the cupcake was presplit so it would break unevenly) or by such justifications as awarding Brownie the chocolate cupcake because of his name. Stage IA's concern for equality was indicated by breaking the bigger peice off so the two pieces would

be exactly equal. Stage IB concern for reward according to merit was indicated by awarding the whole cupcake or the larger piece to the other person for helping the teacher.

This entire procedure was followed by a task related to our fifth question, the differences due to the type of role-taking measured. We wondered whether the relation we found between moral reasoning and perceptual role-taking would be found with a social role-taking test. So we used an interview to assess the child's understanding of others' feelings, thought, and perceptions of the situation, rather than his judgements about what should be done. The format was patterned after Selman's procedure for primary school children (1975), but was simplified. Three levels of role-taking were scored according to the definitions of levels specified by Selman and Damon (1975): Pre-Zero Level is indicated by no awareness that one's view of the world and how it really is are different. Level Zero is indicated by an awareness that people have points of view and recognition of simple emotions in others, but one assumes that in a situation the other person feels the way he would. Level One is indicated by an awareness that different people may have a different perception of a situation and may feel differently about than oneself does. This role-taking measure also allowed a more precise examination of the relation between role-taking and reasoning about distributive justice.

We also included a behavioral measure of cognitive role-taking, the Penny Guessing Game by DeVries (1970), in which the child's role-taking ability is scored according to his ability to assume the experimenter's perspective in hiding a penny in his hand from him.

The results of this study revealed the answer to our third question about the consistency of children's reasoning. Their reasoning measured verbally was fairly consistent across a variety of distributive justice dilemmas, in both the picture stories and the real situation, but especially the latter.

Our fourth concern, our attempt to measure children's reasoning by their actions was fruitful. Their reasoning, as measured by their choice of actions, was fairly consistent across the six situations, $r_k = .71$, $p < .001$. The behavioral assessment of children's reasoning was also consistent with their verbal reasoning within a dilemma, $r = .83$, particularly within real-life situation. We also assessed the relation between reasoning about distributive justice and distributive justice behavior by the "selfishness" at each stage of moral reasoning. We counted the number of candies children at each stage kept for themselves in the situation where children distribute a reward among themselves. As the stage of reasoning rose, the number of candies kept for oneself diminished.

Our fifth question about differences in the type of role-taking measured was answered by an intercorrelation of $r_k = .63$ among the three role-taking tests, perceptual, cognitive, and social, suggesting that they all three tap a unitary, multidimensional construct, as Rodgon and Kurdek have concluded (1975).

Given these findings about consistency and the limitations, we looked at the relation between them. The relation between perceptual role-taking and moral reasoning found in our first study was repeated. Cognitive role-taking and social role-taking were both found to be

related to moral reasoning in preschoolers, $r = .46$, $p < .05$, and $.88$, $p < .001$, respectively when reasoning was measured verbally and $r = .42$, n.s. and $.45$, $p < .05$, when reasoning was measured by behavior.

More specifically, social role-taking was found to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for moral reasoning. Each level of role-taking was necessary for the corresponding stage of reasoning about distributive justice as specified by Selman and Damon (1975). There were no cases where reasoning was at a higher level than role-taking. This confirms the early age at which the relation between social role-taking and moral reasoning was described by Selman and Damon.

This relation between role-taking and moral reasoning about distributive justice has implications for moral education models for early childhood. We plan to test the usefulness of these diagnostic materials in developing a preschool moral education curriculum.

Footnote

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